

Gathering Waters: Statement on Senate inaction and bipartisan path forward for Knowles-Nelson

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MADISON, Wis. — The Wisconsin Senate this week failed to advance reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, leaving Wisconsin's most successful land conservation initiative facing a funding lapse in June 2026. Despite broad public support for the program and Senate Democrats' strong interest in negotiating a compromise, Republican leaders pulled their reauthorization proposal from the floor Wednesday after failing to secure sufficient votes within their own caucus.

During Wednesday's Senate floor session, Senator Jodi Habush Sinykin offered an amendment to extend the program one year — maintaining funding while long-term reauthorization discussions continue. Senate Republicans rejected the amendment without debate.

A workable compromise requires just two things: adequate funding for land acquisition and removal of blanket geographic restrictions on protecting land. Senate Minority Leader Hesselbein reaffirmed that the Democratic caucus remains ready to negotiate on that basis.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program enjoys support from 93% of Wisconsin residents and has protected more than 650,000 acres of forests, wetlands, farmland, and wildlife habitat since 1989. The program is a cornerstone of Wisconsin's outdoor recreation economy.

“The path to funding Knowles-Nelson is clear,” said Charles Carlin, Director of Strategic Initiatives at Gathering Waters. “Restore sufficient funding for land acquisition and eliminate geographic restrictions on where Knowles-Nelson funds

can be invested. With those two simple changes, I am confident that a Stewardship funding package would pass and we can get back to work protecting the places that make Wisconsin special.”

Gathering Waters is Wisconsin’s Alliance for Land Trusts, representing 40 non-profit conservation organizations. Gathering Waters coordinates Team Knowles Nelson, which is a coalition of 75+ organizations advocating for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, Wisconsin’s flagship conservation program.